

NEW TANGO

By Gustavo Naveira

Social Class

"It is clearly valid, today, to speak of a new tango."

Historically, the tango has struck observers by its effects within the social classes. It has been said, for example, that in Buenos Aires the tango came from the lowest classes, later making an ascent to the upper or aristocratic classes. To many people, this fact has signified something essential in the tango. To the contrary, it has been said that in Europe the tango first appeared in the upper classes and later descended towards the bourgeoisie, etc.

While this play of upward and downward mobility may have been the case, it is much more interesting to note that what is happening now with the tango, everywhere in the world, has nothing to do with any kind of movement between social classes.

This fact is noteworthy precisely because at this time people from all social backgrounds are dancing the tango. Better said there are people of all types. There are no restrictions. We see the rich, the poor, the intellectual, the ignorant, the prestigious, the marginal, the famous, the unknown, the crude, the fat, the thin, the beautiful, the ugly, we see executives, workers, first class, economy class, businesspeople, street vendors, government employees, the unemployed, aristocrats, and whoever. What is really important is that they dance well. So, this is one of the first important elements that demonstrate the presence of a "new tango."

Modern Life

At the same time, we should be aware that people in our present world have needs that are very different from those that existed when the tango reached its height in the 40's. And the difference is even greater in comparison to the era of the tango's birth at the beginning of the 20th century. People now live under much greater pressures, due fundamentally to the advance of technology, the bombardment of information and the unprecedented growth of communications. In this environment, the tango tends to appear as a great revelation, refreshing and renewing, capable of effectively alleviating these pressures.

As a way of summarizing this, given its complexity, and also to introduce the reader to this perspective, I will point out some attractive aspects of the tango of today, which in many cases can be solutions to the problems of modern life:

- *The possibility of direct, personal participation. One is not simply a spectator or listener.*
- *The encounter with the opposite sex. The endless game of indirection in the meeting of man and woman.*
- *The redefining of roles within the couple, through the given game of the dance.*
- *The development of awareness of the other person, which is necessary and essential for dancing.*
- *An alternative to loneliness.*
- *The chance to lose oneself in the game of improvisation.*
- *The sense of infinite possibilities in the choreography. (A sense which in fact is accurate.)*

- *The sense of power which comes from mastering the complexity of the dance.*
- *The chance to distinguish oneself in a real way. The impossibility of lying about one's own ability.*
- *A solution for stress.*
- *Possibility of social connection and a sense of belonging which come from a specific activity practiced in groups.*
- *Possibility of a kind of diversion and entertainment which is full of substance.*
- *The pleasure of the unusual, the different, the new, the exotic.*
- *The chance to be involved in a world which is beyond the control of governments and large corporations, and the pressures that these things habitually exert on people. Milongas are always somewhat hidden from view, and are held in unusual places, on any given day and time.*

The 1940's

Other important elements for this analysis arise from an observation of all (or at least most) of the partner dances of the past. We see immediately that there was a worldwide movement, which was at its peak in the 40's and 50's, and ended with the 60's.

When we refer to this peak of the 40's and 50's, we are speaking of a phenomenon fundamentally related to the music. Dancing was simply a way of expressing the passion and fervor provoked by the music. It was not the primary motive. The environment of that era generated a great breeding ground that produced composers,

musicians and singers of unique brilliance, who gave us musical works of incalculable value.

Those decades saw a cultural, artistic and social explosion, which extended throughout the entire Western world, as seen in American jazz, the valse musette in France, the Cuban son, the Brazilian samba.

Today the situation is very different. Today it is a question only of dancing. This current dance phenomenon cannot be attributed to a musical event, as in the 40's, given that we dance to old music. Today there is no music capable of producing an impact of the kind the music of that era produced, which could affect people so strongly, leading to the need for expression in dance. Today the need to dance exists, but it has other motives. So, we dance to old music, simply because there is nothing better, which demonstrates that the emphasis now is exclusively on the dancing. We seek to dance the tango well-- as well as possible; therefore we use the best music. Thus, even though people may dance the same or with the same steps, the factors that motivate them to dance are different.

New Tango Style

There is great confusion on the question of the way of dancing the tango; call it technique, form, or style. The term "tango nuevo" ("new tango") is used to refer to a style of dancing, which an error. In reality, tango nuevo is everything that has happened with the tango since the 1980's. It is not a question of a style.

It often happens that mediocre dancers, trapped in a crude and sentimentalized way of dancing, and confronted with the logical impossibility of distinguishing

themselves, will call their dancing "traditional tango," in order to confer on themselves a kind of prestige.

Similarly, when they find themselves with good dancers, dedicated to the development of the dance and showing real ability, they will try to pigeonhole them with some inane term such as "tango nuevo", in order to give themselves an equal status, as in the "traditional" versus the "new". This creates an infinite confusion. Nothing could be further from reality.

The words "tango nuevo" are neither a specific term nor a title (except in the case of a musical work by Piazzolla.) The issue here is how we use our language. With this in mind, these words directly express, through their literal meaning, what is happening with tango dancing in general; namely, that it is evolving. "Tango nuevo" is not one more style; it is simply that tango dancing is growing, improving, developing, enriching itself, and in that sense we are moving toward a "new" dimension in tango dancing.

The New Tango Embrace

There has been much recent discussion, in the community of tango dancers, on the problem of the embrace, dividing the dance into "open" or "closed" style, which is also a matter of great confusion. Open embrace or closed embrace, dancing with space or dancing close, these are all outmoded terms. This is an old way of thinking, resulting from the lack of technical knowledge in past eras. This simple and clumsy division between open and closed is often used by those who try to deny the evolution of the dance, to disguise their own lack of knowledge. Today it is perfectly clear that the distances in the dance have a much greater complexity

than a simple "open" or "closed." There are multiple distances, and they interact constantly with other factors, such that the structure which underlies the dance is always determining and regulating the distances involved. That is to say, what is happening today is that we have the ability to use all and each one of these distances, simply when we wish to.

This division is all right for beginners or for average dancers, who tend to have little real dedication, and therefore usually dance at a single distance because it is all they can manage. But for the really dedicated dancers, those interested in a real and true deepening of the dance, this simple division between closed embrace and open embrace is not even remotely sufficient.

It is not a question of this or that style; it is a question of dancing well. We have learned, and we have developed our knowledge. The result of this is a dance of greater possibilities, of great technical and virtuosic richness, and also of a much more artistic quality, given that this greater range and technical control allow us to approach the music and its dance expression in a much deeper way.

The New Tango in Buenos Aires and the world

Like anything in a process of development, tango dancing has obviously undergone changes since the era of the 40's. And, the remaining members of that generation claim ingenuously that the tango of that time was and is the "correct" one. Tending to support this idea is the fact, previously mentioned, that we dance to old music, that of the "original" tango. In addition, the trappings of the tango of that era are still with us; the milonga is the same, the music is the same, the dance hall is the same,

the tables are the same... and, logically, why should we not dance the same... And, perhaps also logically, the representatives of that original tango magically come to be "those who know," even when they don't truly remember how it was, and cannot clearly identify even one of the few movements they do remember.

Nevertheless, this entire "revival" is only an appearance. These same "milongueros" (this being the term used to identify the representatives of that generation, generally people over seventy, who paradoxically do not accept the supposed new forms of tango dancing, yet happily accept the term "milonguero", which is socially something totally new, given that in the past a "milonguero" was something very different) have changed their way of dancing, incorporating many elements of the tango as it's danced today (they probably do not clearly remember how it was in the past and they therefore take what they see around them); some of them even having the audacity to say that they remember seeing these new steps in the old days... All this, they do this without mentioning those who present themselves as "old milongueros," given their age; when in reality they learned to dance the tango four or five years ago.

This colorful and somewhat comical situation is found only in Buenos Aires, because it was here that the Argentine Tango was born, and it is here that we find these people who lived the history of the tango. But in all the large cities and in many smaller cities around the world, the tango is danced today with no relation to Argentine culture, with no knowledge of the tango's history, with no knowledge of the music, and without the presence of any of these "milonguero authorities".

In all parts of the world there are groups of people who come together for practices, classes, milongas, shows, festivals, congresses, etc., of tango dancing, only because they are attracted to this special dance with its very particular characteristics. They are passionate if not fanatical for the tango, and they have none of its cultural background. They frankly do not much care if the tango they dance is the exact original, and they do not depend on the supervision of any Señor Milonguero. They look for quality in the dancing, and in some places they have reached very high levels. They are after the development of the dance, for the pleasure of dancing, given that tango dancing is interesting in itself, whether it comes from Argentina or any other place.

And this situation is totally new. Never in history has something like this happened, neither with the tango nor with anything else. This is also not a question of the diffusion of Argentine culture (the idea is idiocy); neither the politicians nor the journalists in Argentina are even aware of what is happening with the tango around the world. No one has specifically undertaken any diffusion; tango dancing is a reality, which diffuses itself in a genuine way and without any help from the media.

This is to say that the presence of the tango in the world is not connected to the history of the Argentine Tango, which took place in Buenos Aires. The tango's presence in the world is a fact completely unrelated to history. It is unique, new, powerful, and it has just begun. It is not a "revival," and it is not the "return" of the original tango.

For all of these reasons we can, today, speak of a tango that is truly new.